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ABSTRACT

Traditional Inupiat society was, and is, about knowing the right time to be in the right place, with the right tools to take advantage of a temporary abundance of resources. Sharing the necessary knowledge about the natural world with the next generation was critical. The example of learning to hunt is used to demonstrate features of traditional Inupiat education. Hunting was essential for survival, and the traditional education was a highly disciplined one using many learning styles, "doing" being the last phase. Observation was critical; through it the underlying principles and values were transmitted long before a boy went on a hunt. Through immersion in the stories and customs of the community, a boy learned about the traditions and beliefs associated with hunting, and the attitudes of hunters. Another aspect of traditional education was apprenticeship, which was often guided by an uncle. Apprentice hunters often did not hunt right away, but did camp chores, which offered an opportunity to learn such things as locating a good site, learning to dress and clean game, reading the weather, and learning about animal habitats and behavior. In traditional Inupiat society the community was a school--learning was not confined to a school building or other restricted environment. The estrangement between contemporary schooling and indigenous communities is due in part to a suspicion of the goals of schooling and its lack of concern for the complex and successful aspects of traditional Native education. Knowledge about the traditional educational system might produce schools that are more completely integrated into Native communities. (TD)

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by Paul Ongtooguk

Iñupiat Society: The Myth

Traditional Alaska Natives are often thought of as a common, nomadic culture that moved almost randomly with little more than hope to guide decisions about where to seek the next meal and where to set up the next shelter. The Hollywood image of Alaska and Alaska Natives reinforces this stereotype, as the film image is one of fur-clad people living in blinding blizzards of constant snow. Imagine the camera, as it pans up to a thin line of specks on the horizon. The camera slowly closes in and the specks become visible as people walking into the blizzard. (I don't know why we always walk into the blizzards, but in films we always seem to.) Then, the narrator, in a low, serious tone announces "In a ceaseless quest for survival, the hearty Eskimo are in search of the caribou." The image is an important one, as it represents most people's only visual encounter with the traditional life of the Eskimo. It is also false, as it portrays the Eskimo as playing survival roulette, wandering about hoping to chance upon some caribou.

Iñupiat Society: Some Realities

It is true that most Alaska Native groups often moved, but it is also true that the locations and times of these moves were not in any way random. A culture would not long survive in the Arctic, much less develop over several thousand years, if it were dependent on such random luck. Rather the Iñupiat cycle of life developed through a careful consideration of the environment. Among traditional foods were caribou, marmot, seal, walrus, several variety of whale, many kinds of fish, bear, rabbit, ptarmigan and a variety of roots, eggs, seeds and berries. The Iñupiat also gathered resources, such as ivory, jade in some regions, copper in others, slate, driftwood, baleen and bones. Sometimes the materials sought included grasses for insulation and baskets or animals and birds for clothing and shelter. Hunting and fishing were planned based on the knowledge of where animals and fish had been found in the past, knowledge about weather conditions and the changing patterns of climate.

Camps were carefully chosen locations. The camp, or living area, was selected, because it was perceived as the most likely location of a concentration of food. Adequate fresh water and relative safety were, and are today, carefully considered. There were also settled communities. Over a thousand people lived in the traditional communities now commonly called Pt. Hope and Wales. These communities were established long before the Roman era of Western Europe.

Iñupiat societies developed unique equipment and tools that were relevant for the area in which that society lived. The invention and refinement over thousands of years of how to design and construct the right equipment was a crucial aspect of traditional life. As William Oquilluk, an Iñupiat author, pointed out in *People of Kauwerak*, the invention of tools and shelter for living in the Arctic was inspired through careful observation of the world: the spider web for the net, not only the fish net, but also nets for birds and seals; the leaf floating on the water for the first boats that were gradually refined into the *qayaq*—one of the more graceful and efficient boat designs. There are many others: the ulu, the harpoon, the reinforced bow, the throwing dart and the gutskin parka. The development of tools and equipment is one example that Iñupiat society was not static in traditional times and that change was not a consequence of contact with outsiders.

Thus it was not mere hope and persistence that allowed Iñupiat society to develop in the North. Traditional Iñupiat society was, and is, about knowing the right time to be in the right place, with the right tools to take advantage of a temporary abundance of resources. Such a cycle of life was, and is, based on a foundation of knowledge about and insight into the

AC 022 638

natural world. Such a cycle of life was, and is, dependent upon a people's careful observations of the environment and their dynamic response to changes and circumstances. Developing this cycle of life was critical to the continuance of traditional Iñupiat society. Also critical was a system to share this knowledge and insight with the next generation.

Traditional Education: a Myth

Many educators today stereotype the traditional educational system of Alaska Natives in a manner that is reminiscent of the Hollywood blizzard portrayal of traditional Iñupiat society. A prevalent belief, for example, of many educators is that American indigenous people "learn by doing." In schools the application of this belief often results in activities where students are provided a minimum amount of information and a maximum amount of activities that allow for random experimentation and hands-on discovery. Such a simplified view of teaching and learning imposed on a diversified group of people is as foolish as the image of the northern Iñupiat randomly searching for food in the Arctic.

Two common sense observations should immediately lead educators to question this belief. First, the traditional life of the Iñupiat demanded knowledge and perceptiveness about the world. Consider hunting. The successful hunter had to have knowledge about the particular area, the species being hunted and the appropriate technology. Further, he had to be skilled in the application of that knowledge. The Iñupiat were not successful hunters because they threw themselves into "learning by doing" situations. To learn about sea ice conditions and safe travel "by doing" alone would be suicidal. In fact "doing" is the back end of the educational experience in traditional life. Second, it is naive to think that any group of people can be categorized as preferring one learning style. Learning style inventories are popularly administered in schools today in order to determine student preferences and student patterns of insight. Teachers believe that the information revealed about individual students from learning style inventories is important. Teachers often intend to apply that information as they plan, deliver and evaluate lessons. Caucasian students are expected to exhibit a range of learning behavior. (By the way I often think this whole issue is confused in how much it ignores the demands of the subject being learned. Hands-on learning alone of chess? Ignoring the conceptual issues of small engines is partly to blame for all those so-called mechanics trading old parts for new ones without repairing vehicles.) Why would Alaska Natives be expected to perform any differently?

Traditional Education: Some Realities

Then how were people prepared to live in traditional times? Probably no one alive today can answer that question completely. Decades of changes in society coupled with the demands of compulsory education mean that traditional learning and ways of learning have been obscured and many pieces have been lost. While there are some obvious elements still in place, they tend to be fragmented and are seldom recognized as portions of an entire way of learning. While these fragments can be gathered from a variety of sources, one of the most credible is the personal story. The examples that follow are personal and illustrate how the role of the male hunter was learned by some of the boys in a contemporary Iñupiat community.

Observation

Observation is a critical element of the traditional educational system. The first knowledge about hunting comes from boys watching how hunters prepare their equipment, their clothing and themselves. Observation begins at a very early age and continues for years. At first the boy observes how relatively easy it seems to load a boat. Then, another year, the boy sees more than the work and starts to notice the balance of the load. He sees what will be readily needed, what must not be allowed to sit under the load, what knots should be used to properly tie things down in the various parts. What had appeared simple at the first observation gradually becomes extremely complicated as the issues are understood. The sophisticated observer finally extracts the principles that become the threads by which what has been "seen and done" is understood.

The young boy, through observation, also learns about the value system associated with hunting. As hunters return from a successful trip, goods are shared. In Iñupiat society, it is through participation that a person becomes a part of the community. In contrast to the Robinson Crusoe drama, in the Arctic, if a person is alone, the odds of survival are undermined. In fact, in Iñupiat society higher status is acquired through sharing. Boys learn to prove themselves through helping others.

Immersion in the Stories and Customs

As the child is immersed in the stories and customs of the communities, he learns more about the traditions, values and beliefs associated with hunting in an Iñupiat community. Before his first hunt, he has listened to hunting stories for years.

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These were both entertaining and informative. As a result of these stories told by Elders and veteran hunters, the young child constructs a mental image of all that is required and some sense of the important aspects of preparing and engaging in the hunt.

Many of the stories he listens to as a child were stories that emphasized the disposition—the attitude—of the hunter. In these stories bragging and pride in personal accomplishment would be condemned. In the stories, animals can read the mind of the hunter and either give themselves or not, in part based on an appreciation of the giving of the physical body. Even after the animal gives up the body, respect should be shown in definite ways according to the stories and traditions. This is why some hunters who are deacons and respected members of churches still pour fresh water in the mouth of a seal after it has been shot. The belief is that the seal likes fresh water and that the undying nature of the seal will remember the gesture and bring another body for the hunters later.

The stories about animals giving themselves to hunters might not seem to make sense to outsiders, but it is difficult to imagine anything else if a person has hunted very long. There are times, when in spite of careful planning and preparation, cautious stalking and quiet approaches, no animal will allow a hunter to even remotely approach. At other times a person will be setting up camp and a caribou or moose will walk within a stone's throw and then patiently wait for the hunter to take advantage of their good fortune. How else to account for these turns of events that have so little to do with skill and more to do with the disposition of the animal? Today some Westerners might deride such practices and beliefs. But perhaps the stories are actually about protecting and helping the hunter. Respect for the animal being hunted may prevent the hunter from becoming overly confident or prideful. Pride often produces carelessness and may prevent learning and observation from occurring. In fact, pride and arrogance can be fatal in the Arctic where the best lesson to keep in mind is how little we actually know and how easily we can be swept from the world.

Showing respect for the animals also ensures that better care will be taken of the physical remains of the animal. The importance of such a disposition for the Iñupiat hunter is obvious. Often the stories children hear will emphasize how clever, thoughtful and ingenious a person has been in becoming successful as a hunter and a provider to the community.

Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship is another aspect of traditional education. Often a young hunter is guided in the apprenticeship by an uncle. The uncle's role may be familiar to some parents in urban life who face the task of teaching their children to drive. For while the young person may be capable of learning to drive, the parents are often so deeply attached and concerned that it is difficult to keep the teaching role in mind. Parents can all too readily imagine that this future driver of over a ton of steel is the same child who broke objects and fumbled through life as a toddler. On the other hand an uncle is close enough in relationship to carry the burden of keeping a youngster alive, while at the same time distant enough to keep things in perspective. Hunting in the Arctic is difficult enough. Hunting while keeping an eye on a young person is just that much more so.

The apprenticeship begins on the day that the uncle chooses to take the future hunter out. In contrast to Western systems of education there is no predetermined beginning and ending schedule for the apprenticeship. The age at which this happens depends upon the maturity of the youngster. The uncle has been watching the young hunter and one day, with almost a casual air, the uncle and his hunting partner agree to take the youngster out.

The young hunter has been trying to show, in numerous ways, that he is ready for this. The youngster may have been hunting ptarmigan, usually with a bow and arrows that he and his friends have made. Why is this hunting so important to the young man? Observation has demonstrated to the boys that hunting is valued in many ways. As a child he has seen the appreciation and admiration shown to hunters returning to the community. As a child, when he got his first ptarmigan or rabbit, he was required to give it to his oldest female relative—grandmother, great-grandmother or an aunt. The female relative made a great deal of the event—praising the fine size of the catch and noting how long it had been since they had seen one as good as this. The boy was then instructed to

run to the homes of many relatives and friends inviting them over for a feast. The women prepared a great many foods, but the center of the feast was a stew in which the little bird or rabbit was transformed into a meal for many people. All would eat and praise the stew and note how clever and hard working the young hunter had been in acquiring this meal for the community. All the conversation praising the hunter would take place as though he were invisible and yet he would feel a mixture of pride and embarrassment at all the attention. The lesson of the importance of hard work and persistence in hunting would not be lost.

Apprentice hunters might not actually hunt the first time they go out to a hunting camp. The youngest person sets up the tent, hauls water, perhaps prepares sleeping bags, collects firewood, cooks and certainly cleans. But is this only dreary labor? First, keep in mind that these chores are being done out at camp and so everything is edged with excitement for the young apprentice. But, the real lesson, as a young person, is to learn to deal with the long and hard labor without giving in to fatigue.

While out at camp, the young boy learns about good locations for certain animals, fish or materials during certain seasons. The boy also learns about how to select the location for the hunting camp, what equipment to bring for certain areas and for different kinds of hunting, fishing or trapping. A person would certainly be expected to learn about terrain, travel routes and hazards. A young hunter would also learn something about local weather and about basic weather prediction. Sometimes the significant event is learning about the location of good water and, always, hunting is about maintaining hunting equipment. From these early experiences a person begins a lifetime of learning about animals, fish, various other foods, habitats and animal behaviors.

If the hunt went well a boy would also begin to observe the techniques and skills used by hunters in locating and stalking an animal. The apprentice hears the male hunters discuss the nature of the hunt and anything learned, anything unusual or notable. Often the discussion revolves around how and why things turned out the way they did. They may even tease about the lack of success. But if there is success, the young apprentice helps in packing and hauling the catch. He learns how to pack and store and how to move from one place to another, efficiently and intelligently. The room for error is very slim at times. The apprentice is taught to think about what he is going to do and to ask himself: What can go wrong? What are the dangers? Then he is taught to think again and not to take unnecessary risks, because the necessary ones are dangerous enough. The boy learns that taking risks is for people whose lives are very different than his. Caution and appreciation for life are the dispositions of the hunters who know that life cannot be taken for granted.

The Community as a School

In contrast to the system of modern Western education, in traditional Iñupiat society the community is a school. The observations that a young boy makes are not scheduled in classes or confined to a school building or other restricted environment. The immersion of the young hunter in the stories and customs of the community are likewise an integral part of the child's life. Older men tell stories about everything and the stories are the lessons. When, where and what lessons occur are dependent upon the time, the place and the season. The lessons are tied to the traditional cycle of life.

The apprenticeship, while perhaps seemingly familiar as a model used in Western education, is best understood in traditional Iñupiat education, as one more piece of an educational system that is integral to the notion of the community as a school. Why a particular uncle steps forward to guide a young hunter is dependent upon complex family, social, psychological and community relationships. It is also within the context of a community of hunters that the apprenticeship occurs. Preservation of the communities and societies depends on the cooperation of its members and the apprenticeship occurs within this hunting community. While the apprentice might focus on a particular task, there is no separation of the task from the larger context. Traditional Iñupiat hunters must learn to do several things at the same time. For example, the hunters may discuss how exceptional circumstances in the hunt will be met while they are, at the same time, cleaning their equipment. For the apprentice there is no isolation from the realities of the hunting community.

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Within this context traditional education is a highly disciplined education. There is a need to pay attention to the stories that told about right and wrong attitudes and behavior. There is a need for the young hunter to develop both the physical and mental dispositions of a mature hunter, including understanding why something is being done in a particular way. When hunting in the Arctic, things often do not go as planned and skilled hunters must know how to solve problems. An educational goal of traditional Iñupiat society is a careful preparation of the young for the roles of adults. This goal is shared by the community and the children are both attended to and expected to be attentive. The values of traditional Iñupiat education include cooperation and intense effort. These values are rewarded in many ways, including the satisfaction that the hunter feels when people are fed and he knows that he has contributed to the effort that has provided some of the food.

A Cautionary Tale

This description is only a fraction of the traditional educational system. Hunting skills and conditioning were, and are, learned through traditional games and competition such as wrestling, weight lifting and the one- and two-foot high kick. In addition to hunting, traditional education has provided and is continuing to provide a way for children to learn and accept other adult roles that are essential to survival. Further, Iñupiat society has developed many art forms including sculpture, music, dance and story. Celebrations and ceremonies were a part of Iñupiat communities as were people who were philosophers and historians. Despite the challenge of the environment, the Iñupiat survived and developed a complex society. The traditional Iñupiat system of education worked well within the framework in which it developed.

There are many factors that have contributed to the erosion of the traditional educational system. The relocation of Native people and the establishment of boarding schools had devastating effects, as children were separated from the traditional educational system that taught them how to participate in the community. As Western culture collided with Alaska Native cultures, some practices associated with traditional education, such as the telling of stories by the hunters, were condemned by some as "Satanic." As the Western educational system was imposed in Alaska Native communities, those arriving concluded that Native people were primitive and backward and thus no advice was sought in the kind and direction of the education system formed. When missions were established, the choice of location was often unfortunate. Bethel, Alaska was located at its present site simply because it was as far up the river as the boat could travel given the limited knowledge that the missionaries had about the river channels. If they had sought advice, they might have ended a bit farther up the river at the present day site of Aniak with a better source of water, some trees for construction and higher ground for a foundation. One story tells that when the missionaries arrived in Kivalina in the summer they set the school building on a sand spit, not considering that their school would be held primarily in the winter and that the winter locations for the Alaska Native people in that region would have been by fresh water, in the tree line across the lagoon.

Today, teachers and other educators often ask, "Why don't Native parents care about the education of their kids?" This question demonstrates an ignorance that is pervasive in our educational system. Imagine an entire community of adults who do not care about the ability of their children to meet the future. This is so unlikely that it is ludicrous. Also, it seems obvious that any culture that has survived thousands of years must have had a successful system of education. But many people remain ignorant and unconcerned with the complex and successful aspects of traditional Native education. Why does this estrangement between school and community continue? Some parents may have questions about the goals of the school. The parents may not care about the school or they don't equate it with education. Many parents see lots of papers passed back and forth but do not see their children being prepared for anything that they value. Some parents believe that learning about traditional life is the most valuable knowledge that can be taught to their children. Many parents still participate in the more traditional Native educational system as they prepare their children to contribute to the community. Whatever the reasons for estrangement, the school does not have a monopoly on education in an Alaska Native community and is seen by some as a competing system of learning.

The stories told here are repeated all over Alaska. In a sense they might be considered as cautionary tales. Tales about how good intentions may produce mixed results when they are not combined with thoughtful discussions with local people. A little advice from the people who were thought "too primitive or backward" might have resulted in communities that were located in more desirable geographic locations. Knowledge about the traditional educational system of Alaska Natives might, even today, result in schools that are more completely integrated into our communities. This essay is an attempt to break some of the stereotypes about the Iñupiat that persist in American society and by doing so to promote better opportunities for Alaska Native students.